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SUCCESS STORY

Spreading the word about HIV

Security guards and cafeteria managers are the new messengers of HIV prevention; reaching out to migrant workers in India's largest industrial area.



Photo: USAID/India

A security guard provides HIV prevention information to a factory worker outside his guardhouse in Maharashtra, India

"I am from the state of Bihar and more than 200 workers come to eat at my cafeteria every day. They feel attached to me because we can talk about village life and our families. I can tell them about Bhiwandi because I have lived here for 15 years. They give me a lot of respect and see me as a family member. So, when I talk about HIV; they listen and promise to protect themselves."

Cafeteria manager

November 2011

U.S. Agency for International Development
www.usaid.gov

In Bhiwandi, a heavily industrialized city in the West Indian state of Maharashtra, more than 400,000 men work in the 25,000 textile factories that dot the urban landscape. The work is hard, with 14-hour shifts and few breaks. With a day comprised mostly of work and few hours of sleep, these men rarely talk to anyone other than their co-workers; the factory security guards, who sign them in and out every day; and the cafeteria managers, who give them lunch.

Most of these men are young migrants who have left their villages, their wives, and families in search of better opportunities in the city. Most only see their wives once a year and it is estimated that over 12 percent of them engage in multi-partner sex while they are living in Bhiwandi. Because Maharashtra has a high prevalence of HIV infection, the workers are particularly at risk.

Reaching these men with life-saving information was a particular challenge for USAID's Avert Project, which was launched in 2001 to scale up HIV/AIDS prevention, care, and support activities in five districts of Maharashtra that have high rates of HIV infection. Avert implements a prevention to care continuum program with migrants in partnership with the Government of Maharashtra and the National AIDS Control Organization.

Since it was not possible to provide any counseling inside the noisy factories and the men had little free time, Avert identified the people the migrant workers were most likely to meet during their lunch breaks: security guards and cafeteria managers. Avert then gave them training on how to talk openly with the factory workers about HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). They stock condoms and are sure to target any new workers when they first arrive. They also encourage the men to visit the USAID-Avert assisted mobile STI/HIV testing centers for routine health screening.

"The security guards and cafeteria managers motivate the high-risk migrants to get tested and those who test positive are linked to care and treatment services. Now the workers are more willing to participate and seek information and services," said Sushma, a health worker. Over the last year, Avert has reached 45,205 migrants with HIV prevention messages and tested 4,552 for HIV.